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ABSTRACT

This survey of the Higher Education Panel (HEP) of the American Council on Education was conducted in response to the growing concern among many members of the academic community about the threat posed to our higher education system by a new commercial service for college students, the theme writing firm. These companies make available to students, for a fee, term papers and, in some cases, even master's theses. Of the 441 institutions that completed and returned the HEP questionnaire, only 125 (28%) said that commercial theme writing services did in fact advertise to their students. Public and private universities and public 4-year colleges have been hardest hit by the theme writing services, with private 4-year colleges and public and private 2-year institutions being less vulnerable. In those few cases where penalties for use of the services were imposed, they were more likely to take the form of a failing grade in the course or an administrative reprimand than of suspension or expulsion. Of the 125 institutions, 48 reported that they had taken no action designed to dissuade or discourage from using the services, and in no case were civil proceedings instituted against either the student or the company. The states of New York, California, and Massachusetts have initiated action to close down such firms, and other states are expected to take such action. (HS)

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Higher Education Panel

Report

American Council on Education

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Survey No. 7 June 15, 1972

Commercial Theme-Writing Services

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The seventh survey of the Higher Education Panel (HEP) was conducted in response to the growing concern among many members of the academic community about the threat posed to our higher education system by a new commercial "service" for college students: the theme-writing firm. These companies make available to students, for a fee, term papers and, in some cases, even master's theses. First established in the Boston area in the fall of 1970, term-paper "factories" are now nationwide and have extended their services to the more rural campuses through advertising in the local college and university newspapers. Many of them claim to have papers on virtually any subject; others state that they have a staff of writers to prepare papers, should the topic be one that is not among those in stock; still others offer the advantage of being able to provide a paper on short notice, for an additional fee.

Those who operate the services usually say that they do not regard these businesses as unethical. According to an article by Henry Allen in the Washington Post (February 2, 1972), the president of one such company said that all branch offices were "ordered to display the menacing motto: 'We Do Not Condone Plagiarism.'" Rather, he justified the service as follows: "I am helping students overcome the busy work and repetition and wasted time of going from shelf to shelf and page to page doing term papers in which no learning is involved" (Washington Post, May 4, 1972). The image that these firms wish to convey is that of a "clearinghouse for information" -- background material which the student

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may draw on in writing the paper. Typically, the firms provide a photocopy that requires retyping, at which point students may "throw in their own material" (Washington Post, May 4, 1972). In theory, this practice may seem both sensible and legitimate. In reality, however, most students who use such services take the "background material" and submit it as a product of their own efforts, doing little, if any, rewriting.

In recent months, many persons -- both those in higher education and those in the state government -- have raised serious questions about the legality of such operations. Their position is summed up in an opinion written by New York State Supreme Court Justice Abraham J. Gellinoff:

> Assisting and promoting plagiarism -- the most serious academic offense -- strikes at the core of the educational process, and thus at the very heart of a free society. Doing a student's work for him not only deprives him of the valuable disciplines of the learning process, but tends to destroy his moral fiber by lending credence to the all-too-prevalent notion that anything, including a college degree, can be bought for a price. (New York Times, April 19, 1972)

It is with a recognition of the grave implications of the problem -- one which may grow to constitute an area of major concern to the entire academic community -- that HEP undertook this survey.

The Extent of the Problem

All 520 of the institutions which make up the Higher Education Panel were mailed the survey questionnaire in February of 1972 (see Appendix A for a copy), and 441 completed and returned it. As Table 1 shows, 72 percent said that commercial theme-writing services were not advertised in the campus newspapers as being available to their students, either locally

or at a distance. Approximately 13 percent of the 316 respondents implied by their written comments that they were not even aware of the existence of a problem. According to another 5 percent of this group, theme-writing services did not yet pose a threat to their campus, but they anticipated that difficulties might arise.

The remaining 125 (28 percent) said that commercial theme-writing services did in fact advertise to their students. Ten respondents enclosed attachments to the questionnaire: seven of these were advertisements from the student newspapers; two were newspaper articles on the subject; and the other was a copy of the state code stipulating what disciplinary action should be taken in the event that any form of plagiarism is detected.

Universities have been hardest hit by the problem -- as one might expect, since they tend to have larger enrollments and thus to promise a more lucrative market; close to two-thirds reported that the firms advertise locally. Looking at the overall figures for the four-year colleges, one finds that only about one in four answered yes to this item; there was, however, a marked difference between the public and private institutions in this group, with public institutions being over twice as likely to report the existence of such services as the private ones. The pattern is reversed for the two-year colleges, where the private sector was more vulnerable than the public sector.

Findings

The account of the rest of the findings from this survey is limited to those 125 institutions which reported that commercial theme-writing services were available to their students. Table 2 shows their responses to each of the other items in the questionnaire. Note that the last

alternative to item number 6 ("Commercially supported plagiarism is not a big problem") has been omitted from the table and from the discussion, chiefly because of ambiguities involved in interpretation. The data, in absolute numbers, are reported for all institutions and then for institutions divided into the following categories: public universities, private universities, public four-year colleges, private four-year colleges, public two-year colleges and private two-year colleges.

Of the 125 institutions which reported that commercial theme-writing services were advertised locally in the student paper or by flyers, posters, and so forth, close to half (61 institutions) reported that such services were operated at a distance from the campus, 29 said they were operated locally, and 35 said that both local and nonlocal services were available.

In those few cases where penalties had been imposed, they were more likely to take the form of a failing grade in the course or an administrative reprimand than of suspension or expulsion, the two exceptions both occurring in the sample of private universities. Note that no penalties at all had been imposed by the two-year colleges; it should be borne in mind that only nine institutions out of the total sample of 29 two-year colleges in HEP reported that commercial theme-writing services were available; thus any generalizations from these findings are risky and untrustworthy.

In only one instance -- at a private university -- did a case of plagiarism arising from commercially prepared papers become a matter of record in the public press.

Of the 125 institutions, 48 (38 percent) reported that they had taken no action designed to dissuade or discourage students from using the services, and another 14 (11 percent) failed to respond to this item. In no case were civil proceedings instituted against either the student or

the company. The highest proportion of dissuasive actions were taken by private universities, followed closely by the public universities and the public four-year colleges. A number of the dissuasive actions fell into the "other" category and included the following: formal announcement by the student senate of its opposition to students' use of the commercially prepared themes; refusal by the campus newspaper to accept advertising from these firms; request by the administration that the state attorney general -- and, in one case, the U.S. Attorney General -- take legal actions against such firms; discussion of the problem by the faculty; and, on one campus, debate about the issue on the campus radio station.

Few of the institutions responded to the final item, on the results of any actions taken. Six out of the nine which did respond said that the measures taken had no noticeable effects, while the remaining three indicated that some effect had been observed.

We may conclude from these findings that, at the time of the survey, private four-year colleges and both public and private two-year colleges had been little threatened by the problem. The universities and the public four-year colleges, though confronted with a potentially difficult situation, had done relatively little to cope with it, whether by taking dissuasive actions to warn the students in advance or by imposing severe penalties in cases resulting from the use of the commercial theme-writing firms. Some states (notably New York, California, and Massachusetts) have since initiated action to close down such firms. For instance, according to an assistant attorney general in New York, "about 20 other state attorneys general had expressed interest in the outcome" of a case heard by the State Supreme Court, in which a theme-writing service was enjoined to halt operations until such time as a trial could be set, and "other states [are expected] to take

action" (New York Times, April 19, 1972). Moreover, institutions of higher education have begun to take more definite steps, as is evidenced by a memorandum sent out to the faculty of Ohio State University in April of 1972, reporting on legal action taken by the university, through the attorney general's office, and reminding faculty members that "each possible instance of plagiarism must be fully and fairly investigated through regular University procedures, and reported through the usual University channels. The primary responsibility for guarding against possible abuse of academic standards of course rests with individual members of the faculty." In short, it would seem that the university community is gradually becoming aware of the situation and may be on its way to coming to grips with it, either by legal action taken against the companies themselves or by warnings to and punitive actions against students using these services.

Table 1

Availability of Commercial Theme-Writing Services

By Type of Institution

(percentages)

Commercial Theme-Writing Services Advertise Locally	All Institutions [n=441]	Universities		4-Year Colleges		2-Year Colleges	
		Public [n=35]	Private [n=29]	Public [n=56]	Private [n=242]	Public [n=52]	Private [n=27]
Yes	28.3	65.7	62.1	44.6	20.7	7.7	18.5
No	71.7	34.3	37.9	55.4	79.3	92.3	81.5

Table 2

Responses of Institutions Indicating that Commercial Theme-Writing Services Are Available to Their Students

Item	All Institutions [N=125]	Universities		4-Year Colleges		2-Year Colleges	
		Public [N=23]	Private [N=18]	Public [N=25]	Private [N=50]	Public [N=4]	Private [N=5]
Area of Operation							
Locally	29	4	6	7	11	1	0
At a distance	61	12	6	11	28	2	2
Both	35	7	6	7	11	1	3
Penalties Imposed							
Expulsion	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Suspension	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Course failure	7	2	2	1	2	0	0
Reprimand	7	2	3	0	2	0	0
Other	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
No response	108	18	11	24	46	4	5
Reported in Public Press							
Yes	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
No	124	23	17	25	50	4	5
Dissuasive Actions							
Civil proceedings:							
Against student	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Against company	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Formal warning	24	5	4	4	9	1	1
Publicizing cases	2	1	0	0	1	0	0
Term paper requirements modified	9	1	3	0	4	0	1
Other	28	4	3	5	16	0	0
No action taken	48	9	6	10	20	3	0
No response	14	3	2	6	0	0	3
Results of Actions							
Services out of business	2	0	1	1	0	0	0
Fewer cases	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
No effect	6	3	1	0	1	0	1
No response	116	20	16	23	49	4	4

Appendix A

American Council on Education
Higher Education Panel
Survey No. 7

Commercial Theme Writing Services

1. Are commercial services for theme or thesis writing offered to your students through local advertising (newspapers, flyers, posters, etc.)? Yes___ No___

2. Are these services operated locally____, at a distance (by mail or phone)___, or both____?

3. If your institution has had cases of plagiarism stemming from these commercially prepared papers, what penalties have been imposed?

	Approximate No.		Approximate No.
Expulsion	_____	Reprimand	_____
Suspension	_____	Other	_____
Course failure	_____	Please specify	_____

4. Have any of these cases become matters of record in the public press?

Yes_____ No_____

5. What actions, if any, has your institution taken to discourage the use of such services?

Civil proceedings: Against the student____; Against the company_____.
(Please provide an approximate number in blanks above)

Formal warning to students against the use of the services_____

Publicizing of cases where penalties have been imposed_____

Term papers no longer required (or requirement modified) in some courses _____

No action taken_____

Other_____ Please specify_____

6. If any actions have been taken, what effect have they had?

Services have gone out of business or no longer advertise_____

Fewer cases of plagiarism have been handled since measures were taken_____

No noticeable effect_____

Commercially supported plagiarism is not a big problem_____